

**The FCC's Independent Panel Reviewing  
The Impact of Hurricane Katrina  
on Communications Networks**

Statement of Billy Pitts  
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Madam Chairperson:

Our country's confrontation with natural disasters last year revealed with tragic clarity the need for the nation to raise emergency communications to a top priority.

As Chairman Martin has noted, it is critical that the nation develop a comprehensive and robust system of emergency communications that will enable officials at the national, state, and local levels to reach affected citizens in the most efficient and effective manner possible. I want to commend Chairman Martin for creating this panel as an important first step in formulating a plan for achieving this crucial objective.

We have the opportunity to share our pieces of the puzzle to determine how we can work together more closely to be better prepared as a nation the next time something of this nature occurs.

Our company, *The NTI Group*<sup>TM</sup> (*NTI*<sup>TM</sup>) specializes in providing a technological service that enables community leaders to reach large numbers of people within a narrow timeframe with messages that arm them with critical information before, during, and after unplanned incidences. This new time-sensitive (or TSN) notification technology is a proven means of augmenting existing modes of emergency communications.

TSN technology such as that employed *The NTI Group* marries advanced computing with the near ubiquity of phone service to allow officials to record a voice message and have it delivered to thousands of people in minutes via cell phones and landlines. The technology also is capable of delivering messages to personal communications devices, such as a Blackberry, PDA, or a standard e-mail account.

The best thing about this technology is that it does not require government officials to install new equipment or learn new technology. All that an authorized user needs to record and send a message to an entire community or a predetermined emergency operations team is access to a landline or cell phone and a username and personal identification number. Should the user wish to send his or her message to a special group, the user simply logs on to a password protected account to select the recipients. Moreover, using geographic mapping technology, TSN systems, like those offered by *NTI*, can deliver a message to every phone within a particular area.

An advantage of utilizing a TSN technology provider is that it gives government agencies access to redundancies that can help ensure that their messages are being heard. For example, calls are delivered by multiple carriers using multiple streams of delivery (standard phone lines, VoIP, e-mail, etc.) and phone numbers are stored in multiple, highly secure data centers to minimize issues should one region experience a power outage, hurricane, flood, or some other type of damage that might make it impossible to deliver a call.

In this regard, TSN service providers represent a quantum leap forward from older auto-dialer systems. While those systems typically can take hours, if not days, to deliver large numbers of messages, TSN providers, such as *NTI*, have the capacity to originate hundreds of thousands of thirty-second voice messages in a half hour. Further, good TSN providers utilize robust programming to monitor local telephone congestion (the last mile) throttling calls up or down to help ensure that calls are delivered efficiently without overloading the system.

Before describing how *NTI*'s TSN services were used during Hurricane Katrina, I want to mention two other critical features of this technology. First is the use of a "credible spokesperson" to deliver urgently needed information uniformly and clearly in a leader's own voice and in the recipient's own language. In a time of crisis, it is important that citizenry receive consistent information from a source that is both familiar and credible. The only system that can achieve that goal is one that allows a local mayor, fire chief, or school superintendent to formulate and deliver the message. Our nation is far too dependent upon the media to get important messages out to our citizenry.

Second, TSN systems such as those developed by *NTI* have interactive capabilities. They not only deliver messages, but they allow the recipients to communicate back to the sender. For example, the sending party can inquire whether a recipient is in need of assistance and the recipient, using his or her phone's touch-tone capability, can send an appropriate response, greatly facilitating relief efforts. In addition, the system provides automatic reports regarding the success or failure of a call attempt, indicating whether the call has been received by a live person, an answering machine, or has gone unanswered or failed to go through due to network congestion.

The benefits of both the credible spokesperson and the interactive capabilities of *NTI*'s TSN system were dramatically demonstrated during last year's hurricanes. School systems in the areas affected by the storms used the *NTI Connect-ED*<sup>™</sup> system to deliver over 2.3 million hurricane focused messages to members of the public.

Before and after both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, the East Baton Rouge Parish School district used the *NTI Connect-ED* system to send urgent messages to more than 34,000 phone numbers multiple times to inform families and employees about school closings.

After the storm made landfall, the Lafayette Parish School District sent messages to nearly 300 transportation employees to request that they volunteer their assistance in a city-wide rescue operation. The parish also delivered several messages to over 56,000 phone numbers regarding pre- and post-Katrina school closings and over 61,000 phone numbers pre-Hurricane Rita, an indication of an increase in contact information after the first storm.

I could give you numerous additional examples from school districts impacted by the hurricanes, but the most pertinent to our discussions on this panel are demonstrated by the techniques employed by St. Charles Parish school district.

In addition to sending out an evacuation message to over 21,000 phone numbers in advance of Hurricane Katrina, the communications director, Rochelle Cancienne, continued to use the system in the storm's aftermath to assist her parish's Emergency Operations Center to better communicate with its citizenry. Working with our client care center, frequently at 2 AM when she could get a call out over her own cell phone, she was able to:

- provide guidance when the local news stations and radio stations were inoperable
- help residents understand the extent and location of damage within the parish
- reassure district employees (the largest employee base in the parish) that they would continue to be paid
- provide a reconstruction and opening schedule, helping restore a sense of normalcy for the community
- regularly update constituents as to their progress against the reconstruction schedule
- establish a special sub-group for ongoing communication with the additional parents that the school district took in just weeks after they were dislocated from other school districts in the greater New Orleans area
- reassure parish citizens that the scenes that they were seeing on television were not happening in their parish.

Additionally, St. Charles Parish School District helped the parish's Emergency Operations Center to monitor the capacity of the local telephone lines by constantly analyzing their call delivery reports. The district saw call delivery success rates dip as low as 8% on August 29<sup>th</sup> but climb back up to 28% just seven days later. Within a month, the district was back to a standard +80% success rate.

Ms. Cancienne told us afterwards that the system played a key role in holding the community together. As she noted, prior to implementing the *NTI Connect-ED* system, the school system's most effective means of mass communications was over the PA system at Friday night football games.

As a result of the lessons learned, St. Charles Parish School District is now collecting data three times per year rather than once per year in October to ensure that data is up-to-date. Additionally, the district is accepting relocation contact information so that they can communicate with staff and families who have evacuated – better ensuring that they will receive the message when local telephone lines might be impacted within the parish itself.

In the future, the district would like us to work with the phone company to overlay data to determine where outages have been repaired

Our experience and that of our school system clients, during this summer's hurricanes demonstrated the significant role that TSN technology can play in all kinds of emergency situations; therefore, we have launched a new service, *Connect-CTY™* tailored for use by smaller and mid-sized municipalities.

There is no question that we, as a nation, need to be forward looking in our thinking about emergency communications. However, time-sensitive notification systems exist today and they provide an advanced means of augmenting our current communications services at an affordable cost to the public.

I hope we are able to capitalize on what we know and successfully explore the possibilities beyond the accumulated knowledge and experience that we bring to the table. Emergency communications represents a critical need and we simply cannot wait another four or five years without addressing it. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that lives are in the balance.

I look forward to working with you as we endeavor to guide our government in the development of an emergency communications capability that offers the greatest measure of protection to our fellow citizens.

Thank you.